



REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

OFFICE OF CITY AUDITOR – SEATTLE

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A copy of the Office of City Auditor's full report can be obtained at the office Web site at <http://seattle.gov/audit> or by calling (206) 233-3801. Please direct any questions or comments regarding this report, or suggestions for future audits, to Susan Cohen, Seattle City Auditor, at (206) 233-3801 or susan.cohen@seattle.gov.

Seattle's Design Review Program: Successes and Opportunities



Design review helps form Seattle's changing landscape.

Photo Source: DPD Design Review Program

Seattle's Design Review Program was created in response to increasing development in the City of Seattle.

Each decade, Seattle's landscape is dramatically altered with the addition of hundreds of small and larger buildings. Prior to 1994, many community members felt that these new buildings severely affected the livability of their neighborhoods and that the permitting process did not adequately address their concerns about this impact. Developers, faced by neighborhood opposition, in turn felt that their legitimate rights to develop according to the land use code were being hampered. This created conflict between the neighborhoods and developers and consequently, many projects ended up as SEPA (State Environmental Protection Act) appeals before the City Hearing Examiner, and then the City Council, and ultimately the courts. In 1994, to create a forum where developers and neighborhoods could discuss

these issues in a less formal environment at an earlier stage of the project, the City established the Design Review Program. The City's program goals included improving site planning and design; providing developers flexibility in adhering to specific code requirements; and improving communication and mutual understanding among developers, neighborhoods, and the City throughout the development review process.

How the Program Works

Seattle's Design Review Program requires projects that meet certain thresholds to undergo at least two public design review meetings as part of the Master Use Permit process. These reviews are conducted by one of seven Design Review Boards, each covering a specific geographic area of the city. The Design Review Boards are made up of five citizen volunteers appointed by the Mayor and City Council. By law, Boards must be composed of: a design professional, a developer, a community representative, a local residential representative and a local business representative. Design Review Boards' duties include: synthesizing community input on design concerns, providing early design guidance to the development team and community, recommending specific conditions of approval that are consistent with the applicable design guidelines to the Department of Planning and Development Director, and ensuring fair and consistent application of Citywide or neighborhood-specific guidelines.

Why We Did This Study

At the request of Councilmember Peter Steinbrueck, we conducted this audit to determine the program's effectiveness in meeting its objectives and its impact on the quality of design in Seattle's built environment.

What We Did

We conducted more than 40 interviews with major stakeholders in the program, including: architects, developers, land use planners and attorneys, outside experts, city program managers, and design review board chairs. We reviewed program information from the Department of Planning and Development (DPD), and observed nine design review board or related meetings.

In addition to studying Seattle's design review program, we interviewed planning officials from nine other jurisdictions and visited the City of Portland, Oregon. We chose to examine Portland's system because of its geographical proximity and the reputation it has gained as producing quality design outcomes. In Portland, we met with city officials from the Urban Design Land Use Review Department and the Design Commission Chair, and sat in on one of their Design Commission meetings.

Program Evaluated against 28 criteria

Green: fully meets its legislative mandate or performance criteria

Yellow: there may be opportunities to strengthen the program

Red: there may be significant opportunities to strengthen the program

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| Design modifications result in projects which: Generally fit better in neighborhoods | Green |
| Generally enhance the character of the City | Yellow |
| Process allows architects and developers the latitude to find creative design solutions | Yellow |
| Process allows flexibility in the application of development standards to better meet: The intent of the land use code | Yellow |
| Neighborhood objectives | Green |
| Process improves communication between: The developer and the neighborhood | Yellow |
| Developers and the City | Green |
| Neighborhoods and the City | Yellow |
| Board members have design experience relevant to the projects they review | Yellow |
| New Board members: Are offered comprehensive orientation | Green |
| Participate in orientation | Yellow |
| All Board members: Are offered on-going training | Green |
| Participate in on-going training | Yellow |
| Program provides design criteria for Boards to use when reviewing projects | Green |
| Projects are assigned to planners with design education, expertise and experience | Yellow |
| Planners have sufficient time and resources to fully support the applicant, Board and City | Red |
| Project assignments take into account the need for continuity in the design review process | Red |
| Board Chair and planners relative roles are clear | Yellow |
| Meeting logistics are handled adequately | Green |
| Meeting space and equipment are adequate | Red |
| Time allotted for Board review is adequate | Yellow |
| Planners receive adequate training | Yellow |
| DPD endorsed Board recommendations are incorporated into final project construction | Red |
| Public input occurs before applicant has made significant investment into project design | Yellow |
| Board meetings promote open dialogue | Yellow |
| Efforts are made to ensure that public participation does not vary widely by district | Yellow |
| Program provides Board members with clear policy guidance on urban design principles | Yellow |
| Program actively promotes design excellence throughout the City | Yellow |



The upper stories of the new building at the left have been set back to mitigate bulk. On the lower levels, brick was used to give the building a more pedestrian scale and continuity with the adjacent building.

Photo Source: CollinsWoerman

What We Found

Seattle's Design Review Program is particularly strong in the areas emphasized in its enabling legislation: allowing public input into the design review process; making incremental improvements to encourage better design and neighborhood fit; and allowing flexibility in the application of development standards to mitigate some of the negative impacts projects may have on neighborhoods.

Board members and land use planners are critical to the success of the program.

Many of the stakeholders we interviewed emphasized the critical role DPD planners play in determining the effectiveness of the design review process and told us that Boards also play a key role. Developers told us that how well a project progresses depends on the land use planner assigned to the project, but mentioned that planners vary

in the way they manage meetings, the extent to which they guide and direct the board, and the degree of support they provide to applicants.

The Design Review Program lacks a system for follow-up on design changes that occur after a Master Use Permit has been issued.

One weakness in the Design Review Program is the lack of follow-up that occurs once a Master Use Permit (MUP) has been issued for a project, a building permit application has been filed, reviewed, and issued, and construction has begun. Currently, there is no system in place to guarantee that post-MUP changes are referred to the DPD planner in charge of the project's design review. Design review planners should review a project before a building permit is issued and before a certificate of occupancy is granted.

Can Design Review Ensure Design Excellence?

While most of the stakeholders we interviewed could identify cases where they thought Seattle's Design Review Program had improved the design of specific buildings, few, if any, thought that the program had produced excellent design. Many questioned the ability of any design review process to achieve design excellence, citing the other factors that affect the design quality, including individual talent, client motivation, and market conditions. The real question may be "What would we get without design review?"

Lessons Learned from Portland, Oregon

- An enhanced role for the planner is critical to the efficiency and effectiveness of the process
- The environment, structure, and format of the meetings helps establish credibility and lend legitimacy to the process
- Optional early design feedback from the board helps applicants identify and respond to salient issues early in the process
- One board and less public participation results in more consistent design expectations, but this is at the expense of soliciting a broader range of opinions
- A discretionary design review process may be preferable to a prescriptive process, but poses inherent challenges for applicants.

Ways to Strengthen the Program

One of the challenges inherent in discretionary design review is to maintain consistency and predictability in the design guidance given to applicants. This is particularly true in Seattle, which uses multiple review boards and does not have a dedicated team of planners to staff them. It is important to developers and architects to be able to anticipate the basis upon which their projects will be judged.

We recommend DPD consider its options for strengthening the Design Review Program in the following areas:

Provide more consistent design guidance to applicants

This could be accomplished by:

- Creating a dedicated team of planners with an enhanced role in the design review process;
- Providing sufficient administrative staff and equipment to facilitate the meetings;
- Enhancing training for Board members through annual or biannual retreats;
- Allowing for more administrative review; and/or
- Reducing the number of Design Review Boards throughout the City.

Provide oversight during and after construction

This would ensure that DPD approved Design Review Board recommendations are incorporated into the project's final design. DPD could accomplish this by developing a system that notifies design review planners to review a project before a building permit is issued and before a certificate of occupancy is granted.



Communities learn about new projects at Design Review Board meetings.

Photo Source: DPD Design Review Program